DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 316 906 CS 507 106

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TITLE Presidential Campaign Debates: A Media Research Agenda.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 42p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Broadcast Education Association (Las Vegas, NV, April 7-9, 1988).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; *Debate; *Mass Media Role; *Media Research; *Persuasive Discourse; *Political Candidates; Political Issues; *Presidential Campaigns (United States); Public Speaking
IDENTIFIERS Media Coverage; *Political Communication

ABSTRACT

This paper examines past media research on presidential campaign debates, reviewing literature from the fields of mass communication, political science, and speech communication, and considering regulatory changes (e.g., debate sponsorship and equal time provisions) and the growth of primary and general debates as an institution. Beginning with the Nixon-Kennedy debates in 1960, the paper reviews the development and proliferation of presidential debates (particularly as they have been affected by the media's role in them) to examine the media-related research conducted on them and to generate a set of media research questions for future inquiry. The paper recommends that future research examine the "triple agenda" of the public, press, and candidates associated with campaign debates. Thirty-seven references are attached. (SR)

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PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN DEBATES: A MEDIA RESEARCH AGENDA

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Broadcast Education Association Convention

Las Vegas, Nevada

April 1988

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Running Head: CAMPAIGN DEBATES

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to examine past media research on presidential campaign debates and propose an agenda for future research. Literature from the fields of mass communication, political science, and speech communication was reviewed. In developing a historical perspective of what media studies had been performed on these debates and what concerns should be addressed in the future by researchers, regulatory changes (e.g., debate sponsorship and equal time provisions) and the growth of primary and general debates as an institution were considered.

Presidential Campaign Debates: A Media Research Agenda

Introduction

Well over 250 scholarly studies of political campaign debates have appeared in the mass communication, political science, social psychology, and speech communication literature in the form of books, book chapters, journal articles, dissertations, and convention papers since the first televised presidential primary debate on May 21, 1956 between Adlai Stevenson and Estes Kefauver and the first televised presidential general election debate on September 26, 1960 between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon. These research studies have focused on a number of areas regarding these debates, but can be principally categorized as providing one of the following: (a) historical accounts; (b) policy discussions, particularly about the institutionalization of campaign debates and FCC regulations regarding equal time provisions and debate sponsorship; (c) verbal content analyses, of argumentation styles and the like; (d) visual content analyses, broken essentially into studies of candidate nonverbal behaviors and studies of camera treatment; (e) format studies, within and across primary and general election campaigns; (f) effects studies, involving examination of voter learning and persuasion effects, as well as candidate image perception

changes; and (g) media treatment studies, including research on how the media affects the interpretation of the debates by voters and its role in the development of campaign debates as an institution.

The purpose of this paper is to examine media research studies performed on presidential campaign debates and on this basis propose a media research agenda. As part of this analysis, some focus will be concentrated upon the role that the media has played in the institutionalization of debates, as well as historical developments which have altered this role. While some mention of radio and print media will be made, the primary focus of this analysis of campaign debates will involve television as a mediator of these events.

Historical Perspective

In order to perform an analysis of mediated presidential debates, some historical perspective is necessary. The role of the broadcasting industry in the debates has been vital to their development, to ensuring that they have taken place, and in making candidates accessible to voters through them. It could be argued that by doing so, the industry has contributed to making voters better informed about issues and candidates, has influenced the setting of the campaign issue agenda for

the public, and has contributed to the reinforcement of the rituals and principles of the democratic process by encouraging each voter to review his options, make a rational choice, and commit himself to being a participant in the selection of a future president.

Throughout the development of presidential debates as an institution, the role of the broadcasting industry has changed, primarily through regulatory effects. The first broadcast debate occurred on radio on May 17, 1948 between Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen in connection with the Oregon primary. During the 1956 presidential primary season the first nationally televised debate was held between Estes Kefauver and Adlai Stevenson in connection with the Florida primary. Hubert Humphrey and John Kennedy engaged in a West Virginia primary debate on May 3, 1960 which was televised throughout the East Coast and West Virginia.

In 1959 Congress amended Section 315 of the Communications Act so that broadcasters would be exempt from the requirements of the equal time provision for all political candidates given that four conditions of what they covered would be met: (1) it was a "bonafide newscast"; (2) it was a "bonafide news interview"; (3) it was a "bonafide news documentary"; and (4) it represented "on the spot coverage of bonafide news events" (Martel,

1983, p. 174). In the 1960 presidential campaign four general election debates were held between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon after Senate Joint Resolution 207 temporarily suspended Section 315 of the Communications Act of 1934 for presidential and vice presidential candidates (Zapple, 1979, p. 58).

The four Kennedy-Nixon debates were all nationally broadcast from television studios, were moderated by television news broadcasting personnel, and involved both broadcasting and print media specialists as panelists, primarily the former. Accounts of the first debate have argued that the televised viewers of the encounter gleaned different impressions of them than did the radio listeners, due to Richard Nixon's pallid complexion, use of a gray suit against a similarly colored background, refusal to wear makeup, and loss of weight (after hospitalization) in contrast to John Kennedy's youthful and athletic appearance (see, for example, Kirkpatrick, 1979; Mazo, 1962; Mickelson, 1972; Siepmann, 1962; Tiemens, 1978; White, 1961). In a recent article, Vancil and Pendell (1988) contest the viewer-listener disagreement allegations through a review of available documentation of the event.

Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy engaged in a single primary debate on June 1, 1968 as part of the "Issues and Answers" series on ABC. Held in connection with the

California primary, the program featured three ABC broadcasters in the role of panelists. In 1972 primary season, this plan was followed for three Democratic debates, the first on "Face the Nation" (CBS) between Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern on May 28, the second on "Meet the Press" (NBC) between these same two candidates on May 30, and the third on "Issues and Answers" (ABC) involving Hubert Humphrey, George McGovern, Shirley Chisholm, Sam Yorty, and a representative for George Wallace (Taylor Hardin) on June 4, all in connection with the California primary.

The Aspen Institute decision in 1975, of course, radically changed the role of broadcasters in the coverage of debates and subsequently affected the sponsorship and location of the 1976 presidential campaign debates, as well as the participation of broadcasters as moderators or panelists in them, by specifying that broadcasters could be exempt from equal time provisions for debates if five conditions were met: (1) that they were set up by a third party (not affiliated with a broadcaster) on the assumption that this way they would not be both making and covering the news; (2) that the events would take place outside of a broadcasting studio; (3) that they would be covered live (so as to safeguard their newsworthiness); (4) that they be covered in their entirety (so as to

preclude the potential for biased editing); and (5) that they be centered around "good faith journalistic judgment of the newsworthiness of the event" and not be inclined toward the political interests of any single candidate (Martel, 1983, p. 174).

It was at this point that the League of Women Voters stepped into the role of a presidential debate sponsor. The League sponsored four Democratic presidential primary campaign debates between February and May 1976 which were nationally televised. These debates were cast as regional forums and essentially set the stage for regular televised presidential debate encounters during the primary season. Using a specific political theme for each debate, these events were held in a community location (not a broadcasting studio) and utilized "subject area experts" as panelists, rather than journalists, although the same journalist was featured as the moderator consistently.

Sixteen years after the Kennedy-Nixon debates took place, general election presidential debates were resumed with three Carter-Ford presidential encounters and one vice-presidential encounter between Walter Mondale and Robert Dole. These events, like their primary counterparts, were sponsored by the League of Women Voters and were held in community locations. However, in this case, print and broadcast media journalists served as panelists (primarily

the former) and as moderators (primarily the latter). Besides the fact that this series of debates represented the initiation of vice-presidential encounters, possibly the two most notable media-related incidents associated with it were the 27-minute audio gap in the first Carter-Ford debate (where the television media had a decision to stop transmitting the event or stay with it, a decision affected, of course, by the 1975 ruling relative to its role in covering such events versus in any way creating them) (see Lang & Lang, 1978) and the Ford miscue in the second debate with Carter about Soviet domination of Eastern Europe (where audience perceptions of the miscue did not become totally crystallized until media interpretations of the event intervened) (see Steeper, 1978).

Subsequent to a 1978 FCC ruling that debates could be broadcast on a 24-hour delay basis, the 1980 presidential campaign featured five televised Republican primary debates between January and April and two general election debates, the first between John Anderson and Ronald Reagan and the second between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. For the primary debates, the concept of "subject area experts" as panelists was abandoned. Three of the five televised primary debates were sponsored by the League of Women Voters, another by the Des Moines Register and another by

the University of Southern Carolina and the Columbian Record (Hellweg, 1982; Ritter & Hellweg, 1986). Print media journalists were employed almost exclusively for three of the primary debates as panelists; for the other two primary debates, no panelists were utilized. For four of the five debates, broadcasters acted as moderators, while for the remaining one a print media journalist served in this role. Possibly the most significant event from a media perspective and certainly from a candidate strategy perspective was the Reagan "control of the microphone" incident in not one of the five televised debates but rather a local debate in Nashua, New Hampshire over the inclusion of other candidates besides himself and George Bush, which was covered by the media subsequent to the debate itself, and which proclaimed Reagan a commanding candidate (see Martel, 1983).

For the two 1980 general election debates all but one of the panelists were print media journalists (the exception being a broadcaster). The moderators in both cases were broadcasters. These League of Women Voters-sponsored events were both held in community locations. The first of these two debates, of course, represented the only time (a) a minor party candidate has participated in a general election debate and (b) one of the major party candidates was absent.

In 1981, the FCC ruled to allow debates to be televised from broadcasting studios for "technical convenience" as long as a "qualified" sponsor had arranged the event (Martel, 1983, p. 174). On November 8, 1983 the FCC announced a ruling which significantly altered the sponsorship of future debates. Much against the objections of the League of Women Voters, the FCC ruled that radio and television stations could stage debates involving candidates of their own choosing without violating equal time provisions (Ritter & Hellweg, 1986). The effect of this ruling was seen in the proliferation of Democratic presidential primary debates in the next election and in the growth in the variety of sponsors involved in convening these events. During the primary season, 14 Democratic debates were televised nationally, regionally, and locally between October 1983 and June 1984 (Ritter & Hellweg, 1986) through commercial network, cable, and public broadcasting outlets. Ironically, while both CBS and NBC sponsored a couple of these events, ABC did not do so; the CBS broadcast on March 28, 1984 represented the first network-sponsored debate since the McGovern-Humphrey series of primary debates in 1972 (Ritter & Hellweg, 1986). Among the other sponsors for the primary debate telecasts were the League of Women Voters (four), the Des Moines Register, the Boston Globe, WNBC-TV in New York, and, for the first

time, a number of independent organizations, namely the Harvard Institute of Politics and the Massachusetts Citizens Coalition for Arms Control, the U.S. House of Representatives Democratic Caucus, the Iowa Farm Unity Forum, and the Chicago Bar Association (Hellweg, 1984; Ritter & Hellweg, 1986). A variety of formats was tested in these debates. Traditional panelists were almost entirely dispensed with. Television news anchors or commentators were often the moderators (e.g., Tom Brokaw, John Chancellor, Ted Koppel, Dan Rather, Sander Vanocur, and Barbara Walters), an informal format generally being used by them to stimulate discussion rather than the proceedings being legislated by panelist questions (Hellweg, 1984). Community facilities were employed by and large for these debates (including universities).

The two presidential and single vice-presidential debates in 1984, between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale and between George Bush and Geraldine Ferraro, respectively, were sponsored by the League of Women Voters. For all three events, the moderators were journalists; the panelists were broadcast and print media journalists, primarily the latter.

Reports from the deliberations of two national study groups on presidential debates in 1985 and 1986 significantly affected the sponsorship of these events in 1988. First,

the bipartisan Commission on National Elections, established by the Center for Strategic and International Studies at Georgetown University in February 1985, co-chaired by Melvin Laird and Robert Strauss, and comprised of 40 representatives from the media, business, public service, labor, and public interest organizations, recommended that (a) presidential debates should be institutionalized; and (b) the two major political parties should assume responsibility for ensuring that their nominees would participate in such events by securing their commitment prior to their nomination. Included with the report was a Memorandum of Agreement on Presidential Candidate Joint Appearances signed by the chairmen of the Republican and Democratic Party National Committees, Frank Fahrenkopf and Paul Kirk, two members of the Commission.

Second, a study group, assembled in December 1986 at the Harvard University Institute of Politics, sponsored by the Twentieth Century Fund, chaired by Newton Minow, and comprised of 30 participants and observers of past debates, recommended that: (a) presidential debates should be institutionalized to prevent their speculation from taking over the focus of the campaigns themselves; and (b) the two major parties should jointly establish a non-profit, tax-exempt bipartisan organization to coordinate the development and execution of these events. Much to the

opposition of the League of Women Voters, on February 18, 1987 the chairmen of the two major parties announced the formation of the Commission on Presidential Debates, a body whose purpose it was to sponsor both presidential and vice-presidential debates commencing with the 1988 campaign. Co-chaired by these two individuals, the ten-member Commission has laid the foundation for three presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate in the fall.[1]

Whether due to these events or not, the 1988 presidential campaign thus far has witnessed the proliferation of nearly triple the number of primary debates in 1984 and in the continuation of a wide variety of debate sponsors. Without an incumbent in the race, of course, both Democrats and Republicans have engaged in televised debates, primarily the former. The first prime time televised debate for the 1988 presidential race occurred on July 1, 1987, bringing the initiation of such encounters much earlier than ever before. Televised debates have been almost exclusively covered by cable and public broadcasting outlets. Only one national network has televised a debate, NBC, on December 1, 1987 (during prime time); this particular debate, prior to the official primary/caucus season, involved both Democratic and Republican candidate segments on foreign and domestic

policy (alternating order) and was moderated by Tom Brokaw. The League of Women Voters sponsored two back-to-back Democratic and Republican debates in February, just prior to the New Hampshire primary and intends to sponsor more debates in April from New York and in June from California. Print media sponsors have included the Des Moines Register (as in 1980 and 1984) for both Republican and Democratic debates; The Dallas Morning News and The Texas Monthly (in conjunction with KERA-TV) for both Republican and Democratic debates, and The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution for both Republican and Democratic debates. Community sponsors have included the League of Iowa Municipalities for a Democratic debate; the Brown & Black Coalition for a Democratic debate; the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, the League of Rural Voters, and the Prairiefire Rural Action organization for a Democratic debate; the Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies (in conjunction with WLS-TV) for a Democratic debate. Political organizations sponsoring televised debates have included the Democratic Leadership Council for several Democratic debates and state party organizations.

Broadcasting organizations have also played a role in the arranging of some of these debates: the National Association of Producers and Television Editors (NAPTE) for a Democratic debate and the Radio/Television News

Directors Association (RTNDA) (in conjunction with Iowa Broadcasting and KRTA-Radio) for a Democratic debate. Moderators in these debates have generally been nationally recognized broadcast journalists (e.g., Ken Bode, Tom Brokaw, William F. Buckley, John Chancellor, Linda Ellerbee, Edwin Newman, Roger Mudd, and Judy Woodruff), with exceptions occurring in some of the community-sponsored forums where a key representative has played this role. When panelists have been utilized (not often), they have sometimes consisted of journalists, though on a few occasions a member of the opposite political party (a new feature in the 1988 primary debates) has been present to query the candidates. Universities have been among the community locations employed for these debates.

Media Research on Presidential Debates

Role of the Media

According to Berquist and Golden (1983), the media promote political debates, create expectations about them, play the role of instant critics and respondents, and contribute to "a second wave of more sophisticated, in depth criticism" (p. 247). Meadow (1987) argued that through their participation in these events "journalists have an opportunity to legitimize their self-defined status as brokers between the candidates and the public"

(p. 209). Historically, in addition to serving in roles related to pre-debate and post-debate functions, journalists have served as moderators and panelists of a number of primary and general election debates, making their presence felt at every stage of the process. One could also argue, of course, that debates would not even likely take place without the media.

A number of research studies have been performed on presidential debates relating to the influence of the media on them, primarily on the 1976, 1980, and 1984 general election debates. For example, Altschull (1973) examined the media's response to Theodore H. White's book, The Making of the President 1960, as an incidence of the "jackal syndrome," claiming that the 1960 debates were decisive in the 1960 election, a contention which was quickly accepted as fact.

In connection with the 1976 presidential campaign, Lang and Lang (1978a) examined the first Carter-Ford debate and the way in which the various television networks handled the 27-minute audio gap, with CBS relying most heavily on anchor commentary, NBC devoting most of its energy to interviews, and ABC focusing mainly on the pooling of information, the media being careful to avoid interpretations, but the debate ceasing until the audio mechanism for television coverage could be rectified.

The researchers also noted that television did little to dramatize the event through close-up shots of the candidates for scrutiny of their reaction to the situation, nor did it display any interaction between the candidates during this time. The researchers concluded that while the event which the broadcasters were prohibited from sponsoring was delayed for reasons of technical difficulties, the debate could have proceeded according to the regulations without such coverage but did not, suggesting a "fiction" in the operationalization of the regulations which stated that the media could only cover "a bonafide news event" in connection with the debates.

In a second study of the 1976 presidential debates, Lang and Lang (1978b) analyzed immediate and delayed responses to the first Carter-Ford debate. Among their findings were that while the immediate reactions to the debate divided along partisan lines, gains achieved by Gerald Ford could be attributed to published poll results in regard to Jimmy Carter's performance in the debate, criticism about the format of the debate, and other media analyses of the event.

Steeper (1978) documented the effects of media coverage on interpretations of Gerald Ford's performance in the second Carter-Ford debate, particularly in connection with his miscue about Soviet domination of

Eastern Europe. He noted that the negative decline over time in the public's impression of this performance was too rapid to be accounted for by interpersonal influence, but rather was the result of direct media influence. In particular, he found that college-educated voters were most affected by the next-day publicity and that women were disproportionately affected by this insurgence.

In a study of the two 1980 presidential general election debates, Golden and Berquist (1983) provided evidence for six claims, among which were that: (a) prior to each debate, the media promoted the event and developed public expectations about its outcome; (b) when each debate was completed, print media and broadcast media commentators assumed the role of "instant critics" and "reporters of listener response"; (c) media commentary about each debate significantly affected public perception of the event through a "second wave" of more in-depthly developed criticism; and (d) a candidate's delivery, appearance, and overall manner became more important through the mediated translation of the event than substance.

Collard (1983) performed a content analysis of the two 1980 general election debates and the press coverage associated with them, finding that while the debate content was overwhelmingly issue oriented, the press coverage was more aimed at images and the campaign itself;

however, the researcher noted that the press coverage changed over time, initially being more issue-oriented and then emphasizing interpretation by others and reactions of the candidates. In a similar study, Morello (1980) concluded that the news media failed to take notice of the candidate clash which emerged in the two debates, directing its attention rather to "news pegs" (such as possible candidate gaffes) and viewing the events as "boxing matches." On the basis of his analysis, he argued that reporters who cover debates need to be specifically trained to recognize the techniques of argumentation to enhance the analysis which follows.

In a study designed to obtain feedback from presidential and vice-presidential candidates on a wide variety of issues pertaining to debates, Decker (1984) found that: (a) three of the five queried felt that individuals other than journalists should be allowed to serve as panelists in these events; (b) four of the five queried felt that a print media debate would not be superior to a televised one; and (c) all five queried felt that press commentary immediately following debates distracts from a candidate's message.

For the 1984 presidential general election debates, four key studies are reported in the literature which deal with media issues. Jurma and Martini (1986) performed

an analysis of media agendas in the development of expectations about the debates and in the evaluation of them once they had occurred. Makau, Makay, and Golden (1987) examined the journalistic criteria employed in the network coverage of the presidential and vice-presidential debates, concluding that a dramatistic form of coverage could serve both the media agenda of creating useful stories and the voters' need to critically consume these events as a form of public argument. Blankenship and Kang (1987) analyzed the use of verbal and visual metaphors by the press in political cartoons in connection with the debates, noting the prevalence of metaphors based on war and aggression, sports, gender and age, etc. Finally, Banker (1985) conducted an analysis of the relationship between a candidate's campaign staff and the media during and after a debate, particularly in terms of strategies the staffs employ to influence the interpretations of the event developed by the media.

A number of arguments have been waged about the role that the press plays in debates as participants in and interpreters of these events. In an analysis of the 1980 presidential debates, McCall (1984) argued that the traditional adversarial relationship between candidates and the press deflects the clash that might occur between the political contenders in the event when the latter

serves in the capacity of panelists. On the basis of his analysis, the researcher suggested that it would be useful for the panelists to prepare in a similar fashion to the candidates "by researching what the public's concerns are in the campaign, by identifying key disagreements between candidates, and by studying the strengths and weaknesses of questioning by previous debate panelists" (p. 104). Kemp (1987) advocated the strengthening of the role of the moderator and eliminating journalistic panelists altogether, to reduce the potential conflict between "those who write the news and those who make the news" (p. 6).

Jackson-Beeck and Meadow (1979) made the point that a problem in producing a satisfactory political debate lies in the fact that a triple agenda exists involving the candidates, the press, and the public. In an attempt to reconcile these three agendas, Kay (1983) advocated format changes to enhance the potential for candidate clash and the expression of issue and policy differences between the candidates, to allow for follow-up periods for candidates to force each other to address questions, and to encourage the use of equal time opportunities for each candidate. In addition, he advocated that more rigorous methods be employed in the selection of debate questions and believed that the reporters who cover political debates should avoid the temptation to instantly analyze what has taken

place in a debate, and instead seek to achieve more balanced coverage.

Martel (1983) argued that panelists create a "buffer zone" between candidates, but that at the same time the candidate is forced to choose between answering panelist questions and addressing his opponent. He also suggested that panelists increase the likelihood that the contenders will have to deal with "no win" issues. Print media panelists, he contended, are likely to be more penetrating in their questioning and more substance-oriented, while broadcasting panelists, particularly ones who are well-known, tend to be more image-oriented. He further argued that the more attack-oriented debater would probably prefer to be faced with a print media panelist over a broadcasting journalist.

As the 1984 and 1988 campaigns have witnessed a tremendous expansion in the number of debates and in the types of sponsors for debates, it seems appropriate to recommend research which contrasts the use of broadcasting media sponsors and print media sponsors (compared to each other and to other types of sponsors, such as community organizations), the use of media moderators and panelists for these events versus other types of professionals (including the advisability of panelists at all, print versus media specialists, particularly as panelists), and

various media interpretive styles, such as through print versus television media outlets. More specifically, the following research questions might be worth investigation about the role of the media in these debates: (a) if challenger candidates are more attack-oriented than incumbents, do they fare better with print media journalists as panelists in a debate? (b) how does the issue-image orientation of print media versus broadcast media panelists that Martel (1983) described align with debates in different campaigns (e.g., ones focused on the image of a candidate versus ones focused on particular issues)? (c) do candidates react differently in debates when the moderator and/or panelists are nationally well-known journalists than they do with lesser known community organization representatives?

Televised Debates vs. Television Debates

In a recent article on primary debates, Ritter and Hellweg (1986) distinguished between "televised debates" and "television debates." Televised debates, they argued, are presented "largely from the perspective of the immediate audience" (p. 8). In this case, an assumption is made that the television camera is "covering" an event, rather than "creating" one. The seating configurations for such debates encourage the contenders to address the audience rather than one another. Examples of these

debates would include the general debates of 1960, 1976, 1980, and 1984. Examples of primary debates falling into this category would include: The 1980 Iowa Republican debate, sponsored by the Des Moines Register; the 1980 South Carolina Republican debate, sponsored by the University of South Carolina and the Columbia Record; the 1984 Iowa Democratic debate sponsored by Rural America and the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition; the 1984 Iowa Democratic debate sponsored by the Des Moines Register; all four 1984 Democratic League of Women Voters debates; the 1988 Democratic "Economics of America" debate, sponsored by the Radio/Television News Directors Association, Iowa Broadcasting, and KRTA-Radio; the 1988 Democratic "Education '88 Forum" debate, held at the University of North Carolina; the 1988 Republican and Democratic Iowa debates sponsored by the Des Moines Register; the 1988 Iowa Democratic debate sponsored by the Brown & Black Coalition; the 1988 Democratic "Presidential Forum on Agriculture and Rural Life," sponsored by the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, the League of Rural Voters, and the Prairiefire Rural Action organization.

According to Ritter and Hellweg, the television debate is "the undisguised creature of the medium--a political 'talk-show' which is created for and by television" (p. 8). In this case, the audience acts like

a studio audience for a television program which is oriented toward "talk rather than action" (p. 9). Examples of such debates are only available from primary presidential campaigns. They would include: the 1980 Illinois Republican debate, sponsored by the League of Women Voters; the 1984 Dartmouth College Democratic debate, sponsored by the House Democratic Caucus and moderated by Ted Koppel and Phil Donahue; the 1984 New York Democratic debate sponsored by CBS and moderated by Dan Rather (interestingly, conducted in the Columbia University Library in a theater-in-the-round configuration, such that the three candidates were obligated to look at one another throughout the debate); the 1984 California Democratic debate, sponsored by NBC and moderated by Tom Brokaw (broadcast from its Burbank studios); the 1988 "Firing Line" Republican and Democratic debates, moderated by William F. Buckley; and the 1988 NBC debate featuring both the Republican and Democratic candidates and moderated by Tom Brokaw (in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., once again outside of a broadcasting studio).

Ritter and Hellweg do not take a position as to whether either form of mediated debate is preferable. They do note that different sponsors appear to use audiences variably, contributing to one form or the other of debate. They further suggest that the television debate is most

likely in the early part of a primary season when candidates are more willing to risk an unregulated format structure, as evidenced in the 1984 three-hour Koppel-Donahue debate. They argue that the "talk-show" format is most workable when there are not many candidates (but more than two), when the debate operates through a single moderator, and "when that moderator competently guides the public discussion" (p. 9). It is interesting to note that the three primary debates sponsored by television networks in 1984 and 1988 were oriented more toward "television debates," while debates during the 1980, 1984, and 1988 primary seasons sponsored by print media organizations tended to be more oriented as "televised debates."

Among other issues, media researchers might focus their inquiries on the following concerns in relationship to the "televised debate"/"television debate" issue: (a) how does the "triple agenda" of the candidates, the press, and the public shift with the two forms of mediated debate? (b) by which form of debate is the audience more affected, in terms of persuasion, learning about the candidates and the issues, and in their perceptions of candidate images? (c) does the "televised debate" lend itself more to a unified party appearance in a primary campaign, while the "television debate" potentially lends itself to more confrontational dialogue and separation among contenders?

(d) are broadcasting sponsors more attuned to the "television debate" because of their ratings orientation and need to keep an audience interested? (e) is the primary campaign first guided by the "televised debate" (when there are a multitude of candidates), then moved to a "television debate" orientation (when there are fewer single party candidates), and then returned to the "televised debate" when the campaign turns to a bipartisan race? (f) what factors enter into the decisions of sponsors to utilize one form or the other of mediated debate? (g) does the "television debate" run the risk of encouraging "showmanship" over "statesmanship"? (h) what are the effects of the candidates being strategically centered toward one another in a "television debate" versus the audience in a "televised debate"?

Camera Treatment Studies

There have been a number of research studies on camera treatment (and candidate behaviors to the camera) in the 1976, 1980, and 1984 presidential campaign debates. Davis (1978) analyzed the camera-eye contact exhibited by Carter and Ford in the 1976 debates, finding that (a) Carter seemed to appeal directly to the public through the camera during his vocalizations, while Ford directed his attention to the panelists; (b) Ford, according to opinion polls, won the first debate when both candidates

looked primarily away from the cameras, but lost the second debate, when both focused their attention to the cameras, with the third debate offering no clear-cut result.

In another study of these debates, Frye and Bryski (1978) discovered that: (a) while Ford addressed his remarks eight and a half minutes longer to the camera than did his counterpart, it could be explained by the differential speaking rates of the two individuals; (b) in reaction shots, Ford projected a negative image while Carter projected a positive one; (c) in shots of the counterpart during either Carter's or Ford's presentation, Carter was shown reacting to Ford more often; (d) there was little variation in the talking head/shoulders shots of the two candidates; (e) in shots where neither candidate was talking, no advantage was given to either Carter or Ford; and (f) the camera treatment was judged as being fair to both contenders.

Tiemens (1978) studied a variety of camera treatment factors (shot length, type of camera movement, horizontal screen placement, vertical screen placement, camera framing, vertical camera angle, compositional balance, image size, and assymetry) and candidate behaviors in relationship to the camera (primary vector orientation, primary vector target, camera eye contact, and facial expression) present in the 1976 presidential debates. On the basis of his analysis, he concluded that pictorial

treatment of Carter and Ford tended to favor the former, with Ford contributing to this result through compositional, camera angle, and screen placement factors, by achieving less eye contact with the camera and displaying grimmer facial expressions in reaction shots.

A final camera treatment study on the 1976 Carter-Ford debates was performed by Messaris, Eckman, and Gumpert (1979). According to their findings: (a) the camera treatment exaggerated the confrontational impression of the debates by "an overemphasis of the extent to which the candidates were interacting with each other" and by "a corresponding underemphasis of the extent to which each candidate was interacting with members of the panel" (p. 361); and (b) differences in the degree and type of conflict perceived among the three Carter-Ford debates may have resulted from "structural aspects of the television presentations rather than to actual differences among the events themselves" (p. 368).

Frye, Goldhaber, and Bryski (1981) performed an analysis of selected nonverbal elements of the 1980 Carter-Reagan debate, including candidate eye gaze and camera angle. Among their findings were that: (a) for the vast majority of time, both candidates looked directly at the panelist who posed a question; (b) Carter gazed at the panelists during his closing statement, while Reagan

directed his attention to the camera; (c) Carter was given more close-up camera treatment during his summation than was Reagan; (d) Reagan displayed more smiling behavior than did Carter in reaction shots; and (e) overall, neither candidate was at an advantage in the camera treatment given him.

In the only visual analysis of a primary debate, Hellweg and Phillips (1981) studied the 1980 Reagan-Bush Houston debate, utilizing the camera treatment categories incorporated by Tiemens (1978) in his study of the 1976 Carter-Ford debates. Among their findings were that while the camera treatment appeared to be relatively even for the two contenders (with the single exception of exposure time due to Reagan's lengthier talk time allocation), the visual factors under the control of the candidates were more differential (e.g., vertical alignment).

Tiemens, Hellweg, Kipper, and Phillips (1985) performed an integrative analysis of verbal and visual elements in the 1980 Carter-Reagan debate. On the basis of their analysis, the researchers concluded that what minimal confrontation was evidenced was reduced even further in the camera treatment given the debate since close-up shots were primarily employed (obscuring candidate gestures), only one juxtaposed opponent close-up shot was provided to the viewers, and the two contenders were shown looking

at their counterparts only three times during the event.

Finally, Kipper (1988) conducted a comparative analysis of effects of the first 1984 Reagan-Mondale debate on radio listeners as opposed to television viewers. Among his findings were that: (a) radio listeners perceived the candidates more positively (more trustworthy, energetic, and skilled), while television viewers perceived them less frank, confident, and bold; (b) television viewers focused their evaluations on items pertaining to a dynamism factor; (c) radio listeners tended to view Reagan as more skilled and colorful, while television viewers tended to regard him as less frank, active, and confident; and (d) radio listeners tended to rate Mondale as less knowledgeable, aggressive, sympathetic, proud, and trustworthy, while television viewers perceived Mondale as more frank, emphatic, and bold.

Nimmo (1970) argued that televised political debates represent not so much a presentation of issue arguments as a confrontation of visual images. Primary debates typically involve more experimental and less legislated formats than general election debates (Hellweg, 1984). Only one of the eight studies described above was focused on a primary debate. As primary debates have proliferated in the last two presidential election campaigns, it seems as though more research is warranted on the camera treatment

of such forums. For example, one might suspect that the controntational inquiry investigated by Tiemens, Hellweg, Kipper, and Phillips (1985) with regard to the 1980 Carter-Reagan debate would have looked a great deal different had it been conducted on a primary debate which could be classified as a "television debate" as described by Ritter and Hellweg (1986), where the program is "created for and by television" (p. 8). A good example of a primary debate for this type of inquiry would be the 1984 Koppel-Donahue debate among the eight Democratic primary contenders, which featured, among other things, "dramatic posturing by John Glenn and Walter Mondale, each rising from his seat, pointing and shouting at the other" (p. 9).

Conclusions

This paper has sought to review the development and proliferation of presidential debates, particularly as they have been affected by the media's role in them, to examine the media-related research conducted on them, and to generate a set of media research questions for future inquiry. On the basis of this analysis, a few broad generalizations can be made. The media's role in these events has been significant, in ensuring that they have taken place, in structuring many of them, in providing moderators and panelists for them, and more recently, in

particular, in sponsoring them. As their numbers increase and as campaigns feature more than just standard "joint press conference" general election debates, there is much more mediated research on them to be done, aside from historical studies providing idiosyncratic accounts of particular debates. At the primary level, where such debates are less legislated (e.g., where camera treatment is less regulated among candidates) and where more experimentation in format takes place (e.g., lack of panelists, freer speaker turn-taking, lack of strict speaker time limitations) and a greater variety of sponsorship occurs, there appears to be less research on them from a mediated viewpoint. Additionally, little research is available which examines debates "carried" by television networks versus those "created" specifically as television events. Finally, as the media becomes increasingly involved in staging these events and participating in them (through moderators and panelists), as well as interpreting them, research might examine the "triple agenda" of the public, press, and candidates associated with these events.

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Footnote

[1]This material was derived from an information circular entitled "Background of the Commission" which can be obtained from the Commission on Presidential Debates, 1825 I Street NW, Suite 400, Washington, D.C., 20006.